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## LIES, IMAGINATION, MEMORY, AND SELF-NARRATION IN ROSA MONTERO'S *LA LOCA DE LA CASA*

### RESUMEN

La novela pseudo-autobiográfica de Rosa Montero, *La loca de la casa*, presenta la imaginación como una mujer loca que interviene entre la memoria y la narración para formar una narrativa autobiográfica. En el primer capítulo, Montero dice que «para ser, tenemos que narrarnos, y en ese cuento de nosotros mismos hay muchísimo cuento: nos mentimos, nos imaginamos, nos engañamos» (10). La novela sigue, presentándonos una serie de narraciones contradictorias supuestamente tomadas de la vida de la autora. Al final, no sabemos cuál de las versiones es la verdadera. También llegamos a la conclusión que saber la verdadera historia no importa. Lo único que importa es la presencia de una historia interesante que contar sobre el pasado. La vida se convierte en nuestro cuento y nosotros nos convertimos en los autores al recordar, pensar, añadir detalles, cambiar los detalles y acabar con una narrativa que nos guste. Al final, no se trata de una secuencia de eventos del pasado, sino de la manera de que la memoria y la imaginación se juntan para crear una narración. El proceso de recordar el pasado no es muy diferente del proceso que toman los escritores para crear un personaje ficticio, porque todos usamos nuestras imaginaciones para ficcionalizar nuestras vidas.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** metaficción—auto-reflexión—Rosa Montero—literatura española—novela española—memoria—imaginación

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## ABSTRACT

Rosa Montero's pseudo-autobiographical novel *La loca de la casa* focuses on imagination as the madwoman who intervenes between memory and narration in order to form an autobiographical narrative. In the first chapter, Montero states that "para ser, tenemos que narrarnos, y en ese cuento de nosotros mismos hay muchísimo cuento: nos mentimos, nos imaginamos, nos engañamos" (10). She goes on to present several contradictory narratives of events from her own life. In the end, we do not know which one is the true one. We also come to the conclusion that it does not matter. All that matters is the presence of an interesting story to tell about one's past. Life becomes our story and we become the author as we reminisce, remember, add details, change details, and end up with a narrative that satisfies us. In the end, it is not about the sequence of past events, but rather the way in which memory and imagination work together in order to create a narrative. One's life recollection is no different than an author's creation of a fictional character, because we all use imagination to fictionalize our lives.

**KEYWORDS:** metafiction—self-reflection—Rosa Montero—Spanish Literature—Spanish novel—memory—imagination

Rosa Montero's *La loca de la casa* (2003) is a hybrid novel/autobiography/treatise on writing, which borrows Santa Teresa's metaphor and personifies the imagination as a lunatic who intervenes between memory and narration in order to form an autobiographical narrative. Amidst self-reflection and story telling, Montero presents several contradictory narratives of events from her own life. In the end, we do not know which one is true, or if they are all imagined and therefore fictional. We also come to the conclusion that it does not matter. All that does matter is the presence of an interesting story to tell about one's past. Life becomes our story and we become the author as we reminisce, remember, add details, change details, and end up with a narrative that satisfies us. In this article I will focus on the role of imagination in the formation of memories and in the attempt to make our lives take on a consistent narrative. In the end, it is not about the sequence of past events, but rather about the way in which memory and imagination work together in order to create a narrative. One's life recollection is no different than an author's creation of a fictional character, because we all use imagination to fictionalize our lives.

On the most basic level, *La loca de la casa* is a work of metafiction, as it self-consciously reflects on the process of literary creation. Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as follows:

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings

not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2)

While Montero does explore the relationship between reality and fiction, she does not suggest that the world outside the fictional text is also fictional. What she does propose is that we fictionalize that world as we attempt to recount our experience of reality. Waugh goes on to assert that we as observers change reality through observation:

it is impossible to describe an objective world because the observer always changes the observed. ... The metafictionist is highly conscious of a basic dilemma: if he or she sets out to 'represent' the world, he or she realizes fairly soon that the world, as such cannot be 'represented.' In literary fiction it is, in fact, possible only to 'represent' the *discourses* of that world. (3)

While Waugh focuses on discourse, Montero focuses on memory. Before one even gets to language, events are fictionalized in the mind and life becomes a story that we tell ourselves rather than an experience that we have lived. We become the narrators of our lives, whether or not we put that narration in writing:

Para ser, tenemos que narrarnos, y en ese cuento de nosotros mismos hay muchísimo cuento: nos mentimos, nos imaginamos, nos engañamos. Lo que hoy relatamos de nuestra infancia no tiene nada que ver con lo que relataremos dentro de veinte años. Y lo que uno recuerda de la historia común familiar suele ser completamente distinto de lo que recuerdan los hermanos. (10)

While all members of a family participate in the same reality, each person processes that reality differently, and, with the help of his or her own imagination and memory, creates a narrative that differs from that of others who have participated in the same events. Montero does not question the existence of a reality, of a lived common experience, only our ability to faithfully represent this experience, even to ourselves.

The first element to contribute to the fictionalization of reality is memory. Memory, however, is not an actual recording of real events and is, in turn, also affected by the imagination. For Montero, memories do not come from lived experience, but rather from the imagination's perception of that experience.

De manera que nos inventamos nuestros recuerdos, que es igual que decir que nos inventamos a nosotros mismos, porque nuestra identidad reside en la memoria, en el relato de nuestra biografía. Por consiguiente, podríamos deducir que los humanos somos, por encima de todo, novelistas, autores de una única novela cuya escritura nos lleva toda la existencia en la que nos reservamos el papel protagonista. (10-11)

The key factor in this process of fictionalization of life is the imagination, the lunatic of the house. Santa Teresa's metaphor is key in understanding Montero's thesis in that madness implies unpredictability, inconformity, and uncontrollability. The imagination takes events that we experience and transforms them into something new. This is not a conscious or controlled process, as the imagination often times works independently and cannot be guided into submission.

While Rosa Montero's claims are metafictional rather than psychological, there do exist psychological studies to suggest that Montero is on the right track when it comes to the idea that the imagination plays a central role in memory creation. In fact, a 2000 study by Maryanne Garry and Devon L.L. Polashek gives credit to literature for observing what science later comes to confirm: "Consistency, said Oscar Wilde, is the last resort of the unimaginative. A poet, playwright, and all-round observer of human behavior, perhaps Wilde knew what psychologists are just beginning to understand: that imagining the past differently from what it was can change the way one remembers it" (6). A 2003 clinical study by Guiliana Mazzoni and Amina Memon, coincidentally published the same year as Montero's novel, concludes:

people can develop both a belief in and a memory of an event that definitely did not happen to them by simply imagining its occurrence. Imagination alone, without any additional suggestive procedure, increased participants' convictions that an event had occurred in their childhood, and also produced false memories of the event. (188)

Another 2003 study, by James M. Lampinen et al., confirms that the imagination does in fact play a role in false memory creation:

By repeatedly imagining events that did not happen it is sometimes possible to experience false memories with sufficient experiential content to be quite convincing. While this is true, it is also true that the phenomenology of false memories can differ in subtle ways from the phenomenology of true memories. This is true in reality-monitoring paradigms in which participants imagine events and come to believe that they perceived them. We have also shown it to be true in internal source-monitoring paradigms in which participants come to believe they performed actions that they only imagined performing. (891)

Like Oscar Wilde before her, Montero's theory seems to have found proof in the world of science. Science, however, is interested in separating real from imagined memories, while Montero suggests that they are equally valid and necessary, especially when it comes to the writing process, which, of course, is metafiction's greatest concern.

While Montero suggests that all life consists of self-narration, guided by the madness of the imagination, she goes on to claim that novelists go step further when it comes to the process

of creating fiction. Authors accept and embrace the imagination, “esa loca a ratos fascinante y a ratos furiosa que habita en el altillo” (28). Rather than narrating their own stories, fiction writers narrate other stories as well: “ser novelista es convivir felizmente con la loca de arriba. Es no tener miedo de visitar todos los mundos posibles y algunos imposibles” (28). Thus, while all of us narrate the fictional stories of our own lives, writers narrate and fictionalize other stories as well, ones that never took place in the realm of reality, although they may have been sparked by some element thereof. As David Richter points out, *La loca de la casa* is structured on a “theory-praxis” method (31), where Montero presents a theory about writing and then illustrates it through an example. Richter concludes that “Montero takes self-conscious writing to a new level as she demonstrates not only her ideas regarding the art of writing, but subsequently, as she puts into action the very theories and metafictional practices she hypothesizes” (35). To illustrate the theory of living multiple lives, Montero talks about walking by an old mental asylum in Madrid. While the real Rosa Montero continues her walk through the streets of Spain’s capital, a projection of herself, fueled only by the image of the hospital and driven purely by the imagination, enters into the asylum, interns herself, and experiences the life of a patient:

Esa pequeña proyección de mí misma se quedó allí, en el Centro de Salud Mental, a mis espaldas, mientras yo seguía con mi utilitario por la calle camino del almuerzo, pensando en cualquier futilidad, tranquila e impasible tras ese espasmo de visión angustiada que resbaló sobre mi cuerpo como una gota de agua. Pero, eso sí, ahora ya sé cómo es internarse en un centro psiquiátrico; *ahora lo he vivido*, y si algún día tengo que describirlo en un libro, sabré hacerlo, porque una parte de mí estuvo allí y quizá aún lo esté. Ser novelista consiste exactamente en esto. No creo que pueda ser capaz de explicarlo mejor. (30)

Not all stories triggered by the imagination are destined to be written down, but they are all recorded in the mind of the author, ready to come to the page when the writing process takes over. For writers, then, the imagination is more than a fictionalizing agent of their own lives; it is a force of creation of numerous lives, of myriad experiences, which serve as the basis for novelistic production.

At times, the imagination creates numerous versions of the same story, with different outcomes and varying circumstances. Sometimes, previously fictionalized events based on reality can be revisited and re-fictionalized to form new stories. *La loca de la casa* is part autobiography, part fiction, part treatise, or as David Richter asserts, “a cacophony of literary genres” (30). José Ismael Gutiérrez talks about the various genres coming together to form a “linaje mestizo de su escritura” (117). As Montero blends autobiography and fiction, she tells three different stories about a supposedly “real” experience that took place. The stories share some commonalities, such as an actor whose initial is M., Rosa’s age at the time of

the event, the historical time period (toward the end of Franco's regime), Rosa's friend Pilar, who introduces her to M., and several other people. David Richter sees the M. stories as exemplary of the "multiplicity of selves that Montero's text repeatedly discusses" (35). The three versions are equally spaced out at the beginning, middle, and end of the book, serving as a backbone to the anecdotal elements of the novel.

In the first version (32-45), Rosa is twenty-three years old, and a friend of hers by the name of Pilar introduces her to M., a famous European actor who is filming in Madrid. They dine, they dance, and, at the end of the night, Rosa drives M. to his apartment at around 4am. They make love, he falls asleep, and Rosa panics and leaves, only to find her car surrounded by police officers and her father, who has been called to reclaim the illegally parked vehicle. A few days later, she receives a letter from M., which she disregards. Shortly afterwards, she begins to regret her decision. M. leaves Madrid before they can see each other again, and Rosa spends the next six months thinking about him, while he refuses to take her calls. Years later, they meet again, and, when a smile reveals that he too remembers the encounter, Rosa wonders what the actor's memories of the events were. The chapter ends with the story, leaving the reader to reflect on the significance of the anecdote to the metafictional reflection on writing. Since the chapter has opened by talking about passion and the way in which it produces "imaginaciones monstruosas" (32), one assumes that the monstrosity here is Rosa's fear after the night of passion, which makes her run away, causing her great regrets over the next six months. The story appears to be nothing more than an honest account of an event that profoundly marked the author's life.

The second version of the story (128-45) makes no reference to the first and is presented as an independent anecdote. Only the reader who has read the first version can make the connection and realize that this is a different account of the same evening. A famous actor named M. dines with Pilar and Rosa. At around 4am, Rosa drives him to his apartment. They kiss, he offers her a drink, and then suddenly faints. M. is unresponsive, so Rosa goes out to look for help, but gets lost in the labyrinthine tower. Unable to remember the apartment number, she fails to convince the doorman that she is a guest. Worried about M., Rosa makes phone calls, one of which leads to a leak to the press, where reports of the actor's imminent demise begin to run. He never forgives her for the incident. She spends years hating herself, until she runs into him much later and is repulsed by his behavior. The closing reflection is "Si tú supieras la cantidad de vidas distintas que puede haber en una sola vida" (145). Clearly it is not possible for both versions of the story to be true. Montero tells each one as if it were biographical truth, but when compared side by side, they are two distinct stories that cannot be reconciled. The reader now starts to wonder which, if either, is true.

The third version appears toward the end of the novel (238-59). Again, the story seems to be a

new anecdote, although the characters and time frame are the same. In this story, however, the beginning suggests that it is a product of the imagination:

Y es que las historias amorosas pueden llegar a ser francamente estrambóticas, verdaderos paroxismos de la imaginación, melodramas rosas de pasiones confusas. A lo largo de mi vida me he inventado unas cuantas relaciones semejantes, y ahora me voy a permitir relatar una de ellas, a modo de ejemplo de hasta dónde te puede llevar la fantasía (y la locura). (238)

This time, Montero sheds doubt on the story's veracity by stating she has invented several similar relationships, thus attributing the story as much to the imagination as to experience. In this version, Rosa dines with Pilar and M., takes M. home, they make love, but it is a clumsy and unsatisfying experience. She starts to question herself after he is asleep (much like the first version), and decides to escape. The police are once again by her car, but her father is missing from this version. This time, she has forgotten her purse and identification in the tower. She attempts to prove that she slept in the tower, but the doorman does not recognize her, and M. is not listed by his real name. Unable to produce her identification, Rosa is detained and spends a few days in jail. She goes home to discover that M. has returned the purse to her house and met her sister, Martina, with whom he begins an affair. Years later, when Rosa and M. meet again, she thinks that he may be remembering her sister, but he assures her that he does and will always remember her. The participation of Rosa's fraternal twin in this third story creates a link to several other anecdotes that Montero narrates in the novel, such as her sister's brief disappearance during their childhood (104-109), and an experience that the two of them share walking through the streets of Boston at night (25-28). In fact, Martina is one of the most present yet problematic characters in *La loca de la casa*. Martina's character is a constant presence throughout the novel, and her existence is initially affirmed when Montero speaks of a brother who exists only in her dreams: "en el mundo de mis sueños tengo un hermano varón que se llama Pascual, aunque en esta vida real no tenga más hermana que Martina" (119). Martina appears to be such a major part of Rosa's life that we never once question her existence until the novel's conclusion when Montero writes: "[...] supongamos por un momento que he mentido y que no tengo ninguna hermana" (266). If Martina is, indeed, fictional, then the anecdotes in which she is featured are also fictional, at least in part. The line between fiction and biography is blurred, reminding us that this book is not about Montero's life, but rather about imagination and the creative process. Montero asserts that "el novelista no solo tiene que saber, sino también sentir que el narrador no puede confundirse con el autor" (266). With this statement, Montero distances herself as author from the fictional narrator of *La loca de la casa*, suggesting that even events recounted as experiences can be fictional and ought to be considered as such. According to Alexis Grohmann, "lo que hace Rosa Montero de manera deliberada en la obra es introducir toda una serie de elementos ficticios en el relato de su

biografía” (218). Montero neither confirms nor denies Martina’s existence in real life. She is one of many fictional elements that enrich the biographical stories as they distance themselves from reality and enter the realm of fiction. Reality, as such, is only important as it serves to spark the imagination. Once *la loca* takes over, reality becomes unreachable and only fiction remains. In the end, the most central character of the novel is neither Rosa nor Martina, but instead the imagination itself, personified as *la loca* who resides in everyone’s mind, especially that of a novelist.

Montero uses the verb “mentir” to suggest that her sister may not exist in the real world. Lying, however, is part of the creative process. Most traditional novels do not reflect on their status as lies, but it is common in self-reflective texts for the narrator to admit they are lying as they write. Those lies are not malicious, rather they are fueled by the imagination and serve as part of the creative process. Instead of recounting one reality, novelists create and recount multiple possible realities, loosely based on the original:

Lo que hace el novelista es desarrollar estas múltiples alteraciones, estas irisaciones de la realidad, de la misma manera que el músico compone diversas variaciones sobre la melodía original. El escritor toma un grumo auténtico de la existencia, un nombre, una cara, una pequeña anécdota, y comienza a modificarlo una y mil veces, reemplazando los ingredientes o dándoles otra forma, como si hubiera aplicado un caleidoscopio sobre su vida y estuviera haciendo rotar indefinidamente los mismos fragmentos para construir mil figuras distintas. (266)

It is through the imagination that novelists revisit these realities and recreate them. The M. narratives are a perfect illustration of a story that may have been sparked by a lived experience, but we, as readers, are not privy to the experience, only to the versions filtered through the author’s imagination. Each version is equally true as a literary text. Each is a possible story. Cristina Carrasco sees these possible stories as Rosa Montero reinventing herself on several levels: “En un primer nivel tenemos a Rosa Montero como autora implícita, tratando de mantener hasta cierto punto su autoridad y su nombre. Sin embargo, Montero se reinventa a sí misma en una multiplicidad de personajes para mostrar que el ser humano es muchos y ninguno al mismo tiempo” (235). Carrasco goes a step further, suggesting that one of the characters of Montero’s reinvention is Martina (236). If, in fact, Martina does not exist, then it is highly possible that she is an imagined representation of Montero, hence the confusion when Montero is uncertain which sister M. remembers in the third version of the story. In the end, the possible stories are countless. What some would call lies, novelists would call endless creativity.

*La loca de la casa* does tell a story, not about Montero’s life, but rather about the creative process in which we all participate. Montero’s life stories are purposefully contradictory and



serve as examples of what the imagination can do with a spark from reality. The novel's central character is the imagination —not just Montero's, but everyone's. Psychology confirms that the imagination plays an important role in the memories that we keep and the stories that we tell ourselves. The stories and reflections in Montero's novel serve to demonstrate that we are all the narrators of our own lives, and that we all possess a lunatic who is able to show us new possibilities. Reality is but the beginning for a much richer narrative once we let the imagination take over.

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